The Establishment of Norse Greenland and Vínland: An Examination of the Early Period of Greenlandic Society and Culture and Interactions with the Native Americans and Continental Europeans, A.D. 958-1300

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

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Muncie, IN

May 2003

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine the early period of the Norse settlement of Greenland and Vínland by comparing descriptions of the colonies contained in sagas to the historic and archaeological record. Through these comparisons, it is hoped that a richer and more complete picture of the events will unfold. In particular, the study looks at the exploration and settlement of Greenland and Vínland and the resulting cultures. It then focuses on the relationships that the Norse living in Greenland and Vínland developed with the prehistoric Native Americans of Eastern Canada and the continental Europeans. Finally, the paper attempts to explain how the Norse Greenland culture developed living on the frontier between the cultures of the New and Old Worlds.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Suppe for his help and support in completing this Honors Thesis. As my thesis advisor, Dr. Suppe gave freely of his time and made himself available to any questions or problems that I had. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Goffman, Professor Cochran, Dr. Hicks, and Dr. Lassiter, who although not directly involved in this project, influenced me greatly during my undergraduate career at Ball State. These five men's classes and advice, both inside and outside of the classroom, molded me as a student and shaped my thinking, writing, and theoretical understanding of history, anthropology, and human culture in general. I thank all of them for the knowledge they have imparted and the interest and that they show their students.

I would also be amiss if I did not thank my family and friends both back at home in Piqua, Ohio and here in Muncie for their encouragement and support. By listening to the boring details of my research, providing suggestions, and challenging me to strive harder, they have helped me throughout my academic career. In particular, I'd like to thank my parents, Mike and Becky Efaw, for standing behind me through all of my endeavors and being there for me in both success and failure.

Finally, I would like to thank Carrie Kissel for her constant support and assistance. Carrie has proofread not only every sentence and note in this Honors Thesis, but just about every paper that I have written since arriving at Ball State. She has helped me to clarify ideas, work through theoretical problems, and all the snafus that occur when dealing with computers and their accessories. Most importantly, Carrie has helped me deal with the inevitable frustrations that arise with any project, keeping me calm and helping me to work thorough the problems. Thank you everyone.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the late 10th century, Norse colonists settled the island of Greenland and established a society that lasted for the next 500 years on the border between the European and North American worlds. Living in this western outpost of European society, the Greenland Norse were the first Europeans to come into contact with Native Americans. "For the first time, humans whose ancestors had expanded their occupation eastwards around the earth had met other humans moving westward. The human race had encompassed the globe. . . ."[1] Adapting to this new world, the Scandinavian colonists succeeded in building relationships with these native peoples, sometimes friendly and other times hostile, and established a long lasting society that survived through its interactions and exchanges with both North Americans and Europeans.

Around the year A.D. 985, Icelandic settlers first began to colonize Greenland and set up a society similar to those already in existence on the other islands of the North Atlantic and based upon Scandinavian culture (Figure 1.). About a generation after this initial colonization, the Greenland Norse mounted a series of expeditions to explore the North American coast that planted at least one temporary settlement on the shore of eastern Canada at L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland in approximately A.D. 1000. Historians and archaeologists have devoted much attention to studying these Norse settlements and the cultures that sprang from them. While archaeologists have found a number of key sites and historians have uncovered several important documents from the period, the bulk of the extant information regarding the North American Norse settlements comes from Medieval Icelandic sagas.

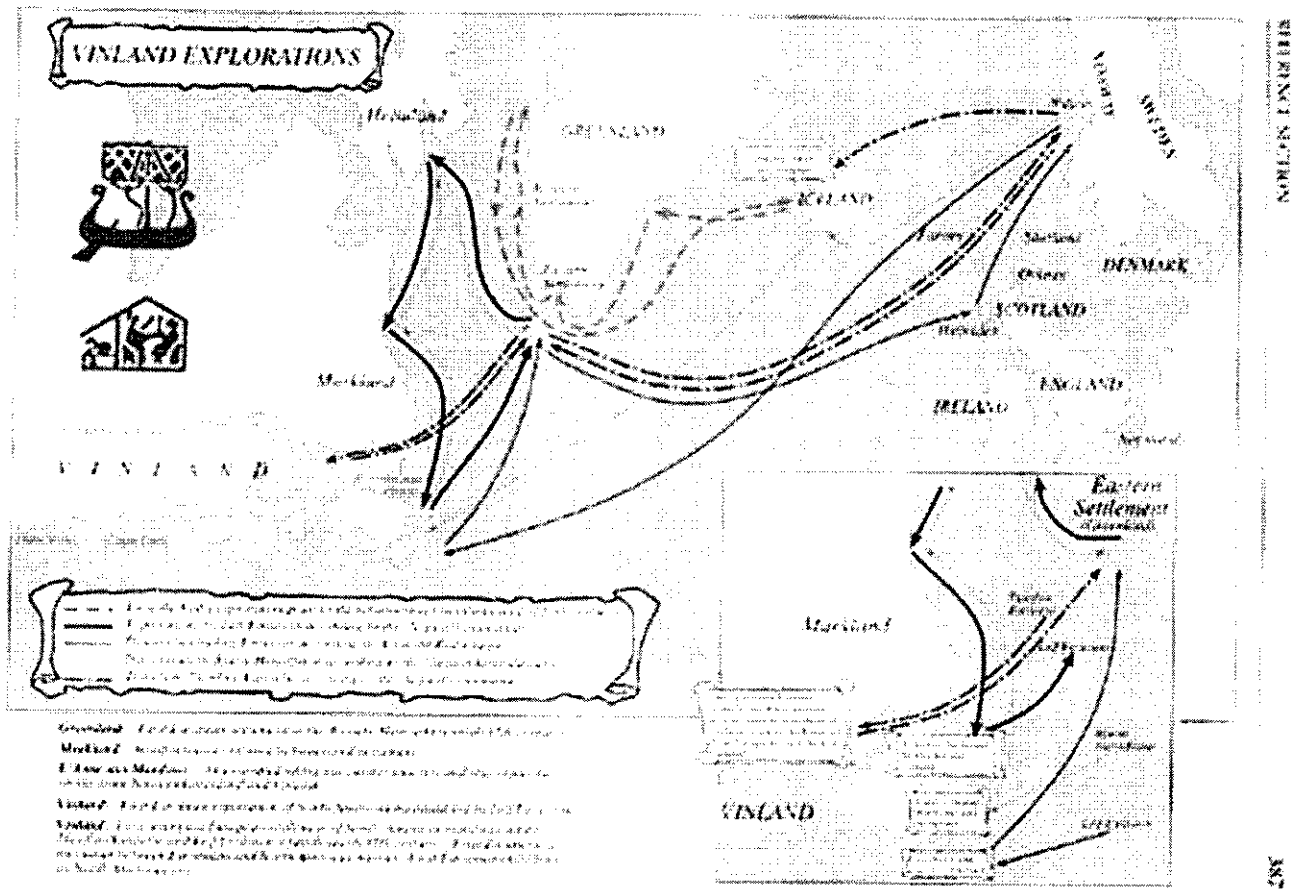


Figure 1.

Medieval Norse North Atlantic Region

Vidar Hreinsson et al., ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 5: 387.

THE SAGAS OF THE NORSE GREENLANDERS

The Three Norse Sagas Describing Greenland and Vínland

Most of the written historic knowledge dealing with the settlement of Greenland and Vínland comes from two short sagas known collectively as the Vínland Sagas that Icelandic clerics composed during the 13th century.[2] The two sagas, *Eirik the Red's Saga* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, primarily deal with the initial exploration and settlement of Greenland, but also include sections dealing with Vínland. Most researchers date the composition of the *Saga of the Greenlanders* to just after A.D. 1200 and *Eirik the Red's Saga* to the first decades of the 13th century.[3] However, neither saga appears to have been written down until several centuries after their initial composition. During this period, "We have no idea what happened to the narratives. . . The long span of time can hardly have passed over them without leaving some trace. . . ."[4]

Eirik the Red's Saga, in its written form, exists in only two extant documents. The Icelander Hauk Erlendssong wrote *Hauksbók*, the earliest of these manuscripts, sometime around A.D. 1320. While transcribing the saga, Hauk Erlendssong edited the emerging text to give the story a more consistent narrative, which researchers believe slightly altered the story.[5] *Skálholtsbók*, or the book of Skálholt, is the second of the extant documents and was written around 1420, probably at the Icelandic Episcopal see of Skálholt. Although younger than *Hauksbók*, many researchers believe that *Skálholtsbók* is truer to the original oral saga.[6] The *Saga of the Greenlanders* survives in only one manuscript called the *Flateyjarbók*. The book consists of 225 leaves of vellum, 113 calfskins, and was committed to writing between A.D. 1387 and 1394 for the powerful north Icelandic farmer Jón Hákonarson. Most of the work consists of sagas

about the kings of Norway, but inserted between these royal tales are a number of independent sagas such as the *Saga of the Greenlanders*.[7]

A third Icelandic Saga also deals with the Greenlandic settlements, but at a later date than the Vínland Sagas. This saga, known as the *Tale of the Greenlanders*, describes how Greenland obtained its first bishop and recounts a latter squabble between Norwegian merchants and a group of Greenlanders led by the new bishop over a cargo wrecked ship laden with merchandise found on the coast of Greenland. While this saga has typically received less attention from scholars than *Eirik the Red's Saga* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, it too provides valuable insight into medieval Greenlandic society. In particular, the saga provides clues as to how Greenlandic society and culture developed after the Vínland voyages and the relationship between the Greenland Norse and the rest of European culture.

Scholarly Perspectives on the Sagas

Three to four centuries passed between the actual settlement of Greenland and the exploration of Vínland and the writing of the sagas.[8] From the late 10th century and early 11th century to the early 13th century, the tales of the Greenland and Vínland settlements likely existed as stories told by the inhabitants of the North Atlantic. Later, individuals composed sagas and passed them down until they were transcribed into writing between the 14th and 15th centuries. As mentioned before, many inconsistencies and additions could have been placed into the stories during this period. Consequently, many academics have questioned the value of the sagas for historic and archaeological research in North America. Birgitta Linderoth Wallace writes that the sagas are transcriptions of

oral histories. "As in a stream-of-consciousness narrative, one association leads to another, incorporating later experiences before the saga teller gets back on the chronological truth."[9] Preben Meulengracht Sørensen "has argued that the sagas do not represent primary sources for the period which they depict, but rather represent manipulated history from the time of their composition, and ought to be analyzed as such."[10]

In other words, a number of researchers believe that the sagas have chronological problems and provide insights into Icelandic society of the 1200s when they were composed rather than for 10th through 12th century Greenland where the events actually occurred. I find this to be too simplistic of an interpretation of the sagas. *Eirik the Red's Saga*, *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, and *The Tale of the Greenlanders* represent three of the only extant descriptions of the Greenland and Vínland settlements. More importantly, they are stories of the settlements, providing names and events in greater detail than any other surviving written source. Therefore, despite the misgivings of many researchers, time and again historians and archaeologists have used the sagas to help them describe the early periods of the Greenland colony and to understand the Norse expeditions to Vínland.

Adding to the value of the sagas is a growing number of instances in which oral histories have proven to hold nuggets of truth that have helped researchers around the world gain insights into past cultures and societies. For instance, when archaeologists began their excavations at the Neolithic site of Newgrange in Ireland, many of the local inhabitants informed the researchers that at certain times of the year the sun lit up the interior chamber within the hill. Archaeological excavations at the site revealed a tomb

deep in the center of Newgrange that throughout the year remains pitch black. At the beginning of the excavation, the entrance to Newgrange was just a small hole, and the box through which the sun shone into the complex was covered by two stone slabs. Yet, just as the villagers had predicted, when the entrance to Newgrange was clear, rays of sun pierced through the heart of the site on the winter solstice and illuminated the entire tomb.[11] No one had seen the inside of Newgrange on the solstice for several hundred or even thousand years, but local oral traditions had maintained the story of the sun's illumination of the burial chamber. This is just one example of the power that oral traditions have for preserving elements of history. While few argue that oral traditions are accurate enough to be taken as literal historic truths, evidence from numerous archaeological and historic sites suggest that the stories related in oral histories typically are rooted in factual events. It, thus, falls to the researcher to identify and test those elements of oral histories that appear to hold some factual basis.

In the case of *Eirik the Red's Saga* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, sailing directions and times for the places identified have proven to be relatively accurate by modern researchers and sailors, while the *Tale of the Greenlanders* recounts the founding of the Episcopal see in Greenland, an event known from the historic record. Archaeologists working in both Greenland and at L'Anse aux Meadows also have verified the existence of many of the major settlements mentioned in the sagas. Therefore, in my opinion, the sagas represent a valuable resource to researchers attempting to understand 10th through 12th century Greenland and Vínland.

Outlined below, I intend to use the descriptions of interaction between the Greenland Norse, Native Americans, and Europeans in the sagas as a model to be put to

the test by further archaeological and historic data. *Eirik the Red's Saga* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders* provide the source material for describing the early settlement of Greenland and the voyages to Vínland. *The Tale of the Greenlanders* begins several generations after the Vínland Sagas and supplies information on the growth of Greenlandic society and its relationship with Europe. By using these written sources, I hope to gain new insights and to enrich the current archaeological and historic record by melding the oral tradition with modern research.

THE GREENLAND LANDNAM

Eirik the Red's Saga and the *Saga of the Greenlanders* present slightly different, and at times conflicting, accounts of how the Norse settled Greenland and Vínland, giving different individuals credit for different accomplishments and describing events in greater or lesser detail. However, both of the sagas provide valuable information, and for that reason I intend to rely upon both stories to provide as full of a picture of the history of the Norse Greenland and Vínland settlements as possible. By beginning with the saga accounts, the Medieval Norse inhabitants of the North Atlantic are able to tell their story in their own words and modern researchers are left to fill in the gaps.

The Settlement of Greenland According to the Sagas

According to the sagas, the settlement of Greenland begins with the story of the colorful character Eirik the Red. Eirik and his father Thorvald first arrived in the North Atlantic from Jaeren, Norway because they had "been involved in some slayings."[12] They sailed to Iceland, laid claim to land on the Hornstrandir coast, and settled at Drangar where

Thorvald eventually died. Shortly after his father's death, Eirik married a woman called Thjodhild and they moved south and built a farm at Eiriksstadir by Vatnshorn. Unable to stay out of trouble, Eirik became embroiled in conflict when his slaves caused a landslide to fall on the farm of Valthjof at Valthjofstadir. Filth-Eyjolf pursued and killed Eirik's slaves, but Eirik retaliated by killing him and his companion Hrafn the Dueller.[13] For these violent deeds, Eirik was outlawed from the region and moved on to claim the islands of Brokey and Oxney. He farmed at Tradir on the island of Sudurey during the first winter and loaned some bedstead boards to a man named Thorgest. The following summer Eirik moved to Oxney and established a farm at Eiriksstadir. However, when he asked for his boards back from Thorgest he was refused, which prompted Eirik to simply take the boards back for himself. Angered by this perceived insult, Thorgest pursued Eirik and the two men and their retinues fought a battle near the farm at Drangar that resulted in the death of two of Thorgest's sons and several other men.[14]

Because of his continued use of violence, Eirik and his supporters received a sentence of outlawry from the Thorsnes Assembly, which forced Eirik to go into hiding while his allies prepared his ship to sail from Iceland to safety. As Thorgest's men continued searching for him, Eirik and his companions sailed west from Iceland in the hopes of finding the land that Gunnbjorn son of Ulf Crow had seen once when blown off course by a storm. Eirik promised to return to Iceland for his allies if he found new habitable land.[15] Sailing west from Snaefellsnes, Eirik approached a land covered by glaciers and sailed south searching for a suitable habitation site. Finding the island of Eriksey, which lay near the middle of what would become the Eastern Settlement, a suitable place to land, Eirik went ashore and set up camp for the winter. With the coming

of spring, he sailed on to fjord he named Eiriksfjord and settled there, spending the rest of the summer exploring the coast of the new land and naming various sites. For the next three summers, Eirik and his men continued to explore the land until Eirik decided that the place was suitable for settlement and set sail for Iceland to inform his countrymen of his discovery.[16]

That same summer, Eirik convinced a number of his allies to leave with him on an expedition to colonize the new land, which he dubbed Greenland, a name he thought would attract more settlers.[17] Departing Iceland at the head of a flotilla of twenty-five ships, Eirik reached his destination with only fourteen.[18] Upon arriving in Greenland, Eirik established himself at a farm he named Brattahlid, while his companions founded their own farmstead in the surrounding fjords and valleys. Because he had found the land and established the settlement, Eirik was held in high esteem and considered the head of the colony.[19]

As evidenced by the number of ships in the original convoy that failed to reach Greenland, these early voyages proved treacherous to the would-be settlers. Thorbjorn Vifilsson's struggles to found a settlement in Greenland provide an example of some of the difficulties facing these early Norse colonists. Thorbjorn was one of Eirik's close friends and allies and had supported Eirik in his struggles against Thorgest.[20] When Thorbjorn began to have trouble with his finances in Iceland, he decided to sell all of his possessions, buy a ship, and sail for Greenland to join Eirik rather than face dishonor in his homeland. Accompanied by thirty men, Thorbjorn set sail for Greenland with his daughter Gudrid and initially made good progress. The weather soon changed, however, and storms prevented the ship from advancing towards Greenland for most of the

summer. In addition, a plague descended upon the crew killing about half the party, and the ship began to take on water.[21] Eventually, the ship made landfall in Greenland at Herjolfsnes where a man named Thorkel agreed to take the colonists into his home for the winter.[22]

Unfortunately for Thorbjorn and his men, Greenland at this time was experiencing a lean time in which the hunt often failed and hunters failed to return from the wilderness.[23] At this point, Greenland as a whole was still pagan.[24] Therefore, as the wealthiest local farmer, it fell to Thorkel to hire a local seeress named Thorbjorg to tell the people when they could expect their fortunes to change. When Thorbjorg arrived, Thorkel took her on a survey of her farm and offered her a lavish diner. She requested that he provide her lodging for the night and promised that on the following day she would perform her magic.[25] Thorbjorg requested that Thorkel provide her with a woman who knew the chants required to carry out the magic rites called ward songs. None of the women on the farm knew the chants, however, except for Gudrid who was a Christian and did not wish to take part in the ceremony. Eventually Thorkel succeeded in convincing Gudrid to assist in the ceremony. As Gudrid sang the chants, the rest of the women formed a warding ring around Thorbjorg who sat upon a raised platform in the center of the room. The ceremony proved favorable to the spirits and Thorbjorg prophesized that the plague would soon end and that Gudrid would eventually marry a good man and return to Iceland where she give birth to a powerful family.[26]

Following the ritual, men arrived to take Thorbjorg to another farm and servants went out to retrieve Thorbjorn who refused remain on the farm during the pagan ceremony. With the approach of spring, Thorbjorn readied his ship and sailed on to

Brattahlid with his men. There he received a warm welcome from Eirik and was given land at Stokkanes where he built a farmhouse and settled.[27]

The Reasons Behind the Settlement of Greenland

The story of Eirik's and Thorbjorn's arrival in Greenland highlights several key insights into the character of the early period of the Norse American colony. Foremost among these was the hardship that these early settlers faced. As mentioned above, out of the initial twenty-five ship fleet that set sail for Greenland only fourteen actually reached the island (Figure 2.). Thorbjorn's trip adds further insight into the dangers facing the settlers through the account of the plague that killed half of the ship's crew. Once the colonists reached Greenland, they still had to procure enough food and, as Thorbjorn and his men found out upon their arrival in the new country, just finding enough food at times proved a struggle. With such dangers facing the would-be settlers, the question remains as to why they chose to leave their homes in Iceland and face the daunting prospect of crossing an uncharted ocean to settle in an unknown land.

Part of the reason for these early settlers' willingness to risk the dangers of leaving Iceland is hinted at in the sagas. Many of these men appear to have been in a state of desperation. Eirik the Red, for instance, had already been chased out of Norway when he arrived in Iceland and after becoming and outlaw in his adopted country had few options of lands to settle in. Therefore, he chose to sail west and establish his own colony in which he would be secure as the leader of the new settlement. A number of the men that accompanied Eirik were his personal friends and allies who also likely had run into trouble in Iceland for their support of the rebel Eirik. Others, like Thorbjorn, had

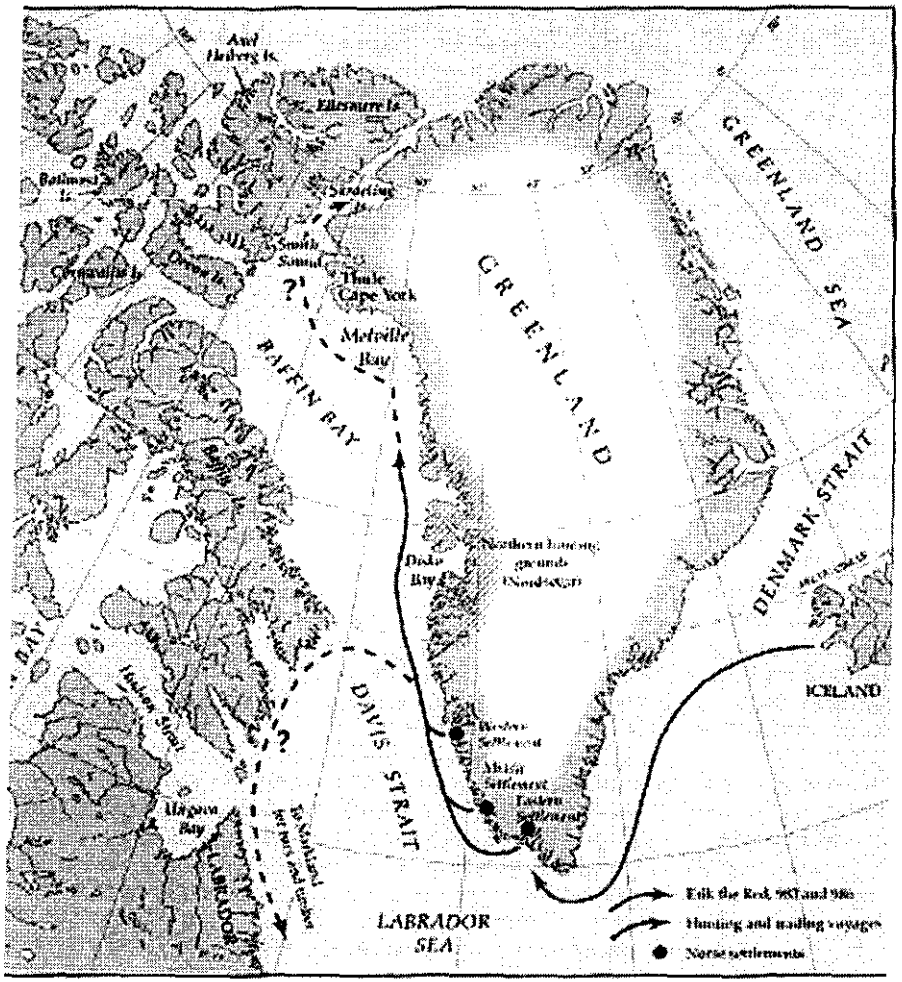


Figure 2.

Map of Medieval Greenland

Jette Arneborg and Kirsten Seaver, "From Vikings to Norsemen," p. 281-284 in *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 2000), 283.

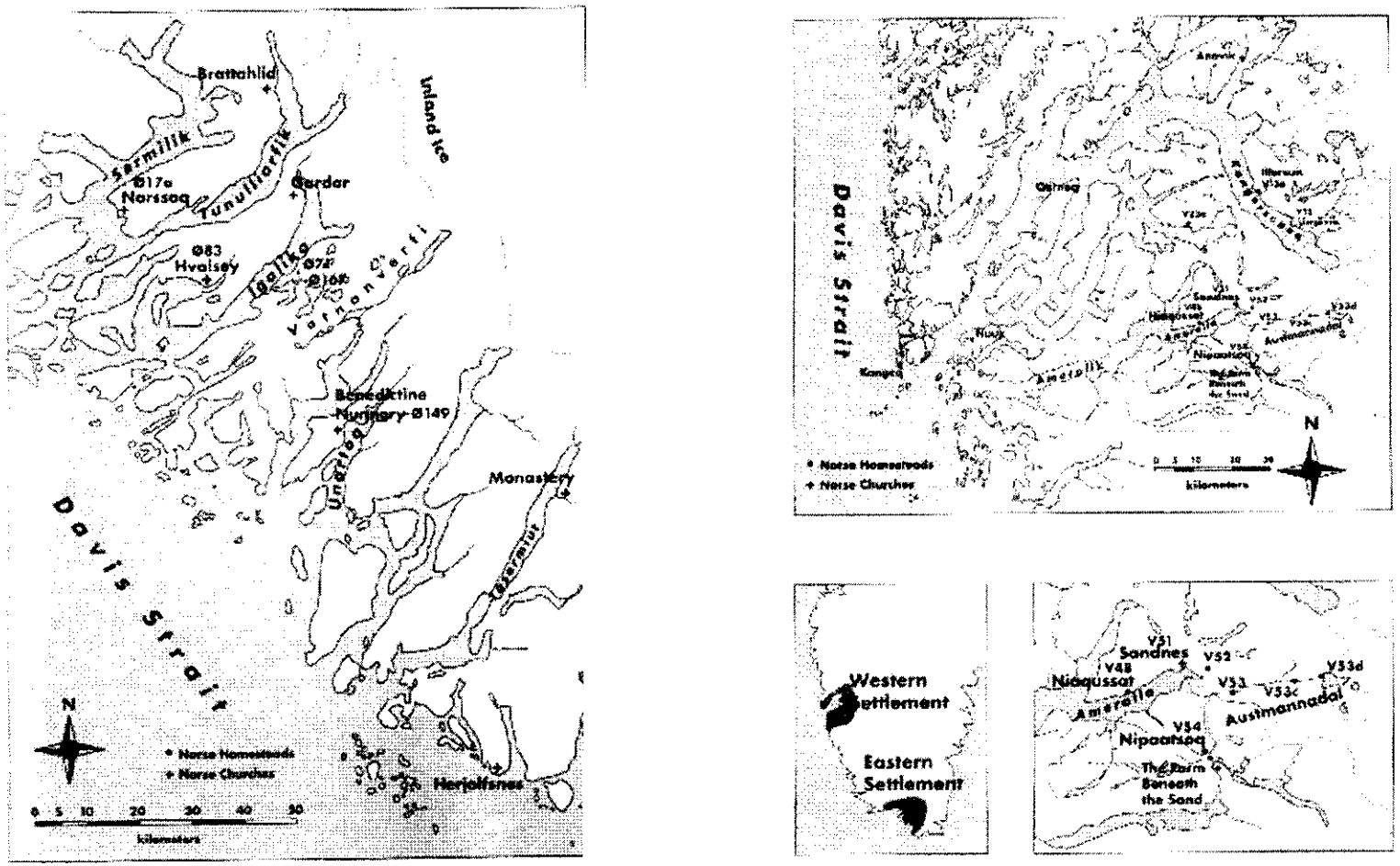
financial problems that caused them to gamble on a new life in Greenland rather than face the dishonor of going into debt in Iceland. Consequently, it seems that the early settlers of Greenland represented adventurers, social outcasts, and debtors who chose to risk their lives and fortunes in Greenland in the hopes of establishing a better life than they knew in Iceland.

The historic and archaeological data supports the idea that by leading this new wave of colonists to Greenland, Eirik and his supporters could and did become powerful leaders in the Norse North Atlantic world. In the *landnam*, land taking or first settlement, of Iceland, those chieftains that arrived first succeeded in gained control of the islands shipping and the best areas of growing grain and raising livestock. They also claimed large tracts of land which they later divided and parceled out to clients and later arrivals to the island.[28] When Eirik arrived in Iceland, he attempted to gain power in the island through his battles with various island chieftains, but in each case he either lost or was outlawed for his actions. Therefore, in the early 980s, Eirik and his followers, as outlined above, sailed west in the search of new land the hopes of leading a new landnam.[29] Throughout the Norse expansion into the North Atlantic, explorers typically employed a similar method for investigating new lands. Upon arriving in an uncharted region, the would-be explorers generally located a suitable habitation site and erected temporary *buðir*, or booths, that served as camp. During the summer the men then fanned out and explored the land, returning to the shelter of the camp for winter.[30] Eirik and his men appear to have followed this strategy during their three year exile in Greenland, in which they researched the suitability of the land for settlement and likely identified the best land that they sought for themselves when the landnam occurred.

Early Greenlandic Society and Culture

Returning to Iceland in A.D. 985, Eirik succeeded in enticing twenty-five ship loads of colonists to embark for Greenland.[31] When the people arrived in Greenland, they found a land familiar to a Scandinavian lifestyle. While the east coast of Greenland was and is today covered by ice, the west coast resembled Norway, with deep fjords, sounds, skerries, and islands. In the interior of the island rose massive glaciers that created drift-ice along the shores and made inland settlement impossible.[32] The first area the Norse chose to settle lay on the southwest corner of Greenland and came to be known as the Eastern Settlement (Figure 3., A). Archaeological work in the area confirms the date of this first settlement to sometime during the late 10th century.[33] During this initial settlement period, all usable land was quickly settled or claimed and the colonists soon founded a second smaller settlement to the north on the western coast of Greenland known as the Western Settlement (Figure 3., B). Excavations at Sandnes, one of the major Western Settlement sites, suggest that this second settlement did not occur as quickly as implied in the historic sources but rather began one to two generations after the founding of the Eastern Settlement.[34]

As the Norse settled the new land, they typically built their farms along the inner fjords and up into the nearby valley systems (Figure 4.). These farms ranged in size from small homesteads consisting of between five and eight inhabitants with three to five cows, to larger farms of powerful landowners that housed between fifteen and twenty-five inhabitants and twenty to thirty cows. Generally, these farms lay between one and five kilometers apart, creating a dispersed settlement pattern that loosely covered all of the habitable land in the inner fjords and valleys.[35]



A B

Figure 3.

Eastern Settlement (A) and Western Settlement (B)

Seaver, *The Frozen Echo*, 3-4.

Figure 4.

Modern-Day View of Brattahlid on Eiriksfjord

Niels Lynnerup, "Life and Death in Norse Greenland," p. 285-294 in *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 2000), 286.

Socially, the early Norse Greenland settlements were still a pagan society, as the island was colonized fifteen years before Iceland legally adopted Christianity.[36] During times of trouble, people, such as Thorkel the farmer, still turned to pagan beliefs and hired seers to perform magical rites. However, while the majority of society practiced paganism, according to the historic documents, the sagas indicate that individuals such as Thorbjorn and Gudrid had already converted to Christianity in Iceland and brought their religion with them to the new settlements. Archaeological evidence supports this early date for the arrival of Christianity in Greenland as the oldest burials in Greenland are Christian burials from Thjodhild's Church that date to the late 10th century. Researchers have not yet located any obviously pagan burials in either of the settlements.[37] These findings add credibility to the saga's description of Thorbjorn and Gudrid and support the idea that within the context of a larger pagan society in Greenland there were individuals who continued to practice Christianity.

While Greenland practiced paganism, it also followed a hierarchical social system in which powerful chieftains like Eirik represented the highest rung of society. Chieftains from Iceland who owned their own ships led the colonization of Greenland, and when they arrived, these merchant-farmers organized the new settlements.[38] Like other island societies in the North Atlantic, wealthy farmers and merchants ruled Greenland and controlled the land and positions of rank. Social bands formed around these great men, with lower ranking individuals pledging their support and loyalty to the chieftain in a system known as *grið*. The grið system was the bond between superiors and subordinates, a captain and his crew, and a master and his servants. Grið shaped relationships, affected labor division, determined status and rights, and were an integral

part of Greenland society and essential for defining the social bonds on farms and ships.[39] So important were the grið relationships that any man outside the system was considered an outlaw or vagabond with no rights. Within this system, the chieftains typically dispensed justice, but a *Þing*, or assembly, was periodically held in which the farmers and freemen met for the purpose of making laws and passing judgment on important matters.[40] Such social bonds and laws allowed the colonists of Greenland to establish a strong and stable society that, although hierarchical, provided a means of survival in the westernmost European realm.

The Discovery of the Western Lands

As the Greenland settlements grew in number, strength, and prosperity, rumors began to circulate about new lands even farther west than Greenland. The sagas disagree as to who is credited with first sighting these new lands. In *Eirik the Red's Saga*, Eirik's eldest son Leif is credited with first sighting the coast of modern day America. According to the saga's description of the event, Leif had previously sailed to Norway where he became a member of King Olaf Tryggvason's court and gained the Norwegian king's favor.[41] After serving King Olaf for some time, Leif received orders from the monarch to return to Greenland and convert the island's inhabitants to Christianity. Leif "feared this message would meet with a harsh reception in Greenland," but agreed to do the king's bidding and prepared his ships to sail for his father's land.[42] Sailing across the ocean, Leif and his men became lost and after a long time sited an unknown land replete with self-sown wheat, grapevines, and wood. Around this area, Leif and his crew also found and rescued a group of men clinging to a wrecked ship. They then corrected their course

and sailed on to Greenland, arriving at Brattahlid where they recounted their discovery of the new land to the west and succeeded in converting Greenland to Christianity.[43]

The *Saga of the Greenlanders* contradicts this story and asserts that a man named Bjarni Herjolfsson actually first sighted America. Bjarni grew up on his father Herjolf's farm in Iceland, and as he got older succeeded in earning enough money to purchase a ship. Soon Bjarni began to make trading voyages, spending the winters alternately abroad and at his father's home.[44] One summer while Bjarni was in Norway, Herjolf decided to sail with Eirik to Greenland and sold his Icelandic land and established himself at Herjolfsnes where he became well respected. That summer Bjarni sailed for Iceland, but to his surprise found that his father was no longer living there and instead was settled in the new Greenland colony. Without even unloading his cargo, Bjarni decided to honor his tradition of spending winter with his father and set sail for Greenland with the favor of his crew.[45]

Three days after setting out from Iceland, storms hit Bjarni's boat, and the men soon became lost. When the sun returned following the storms, the men took their bearings and set sail, catching site of land after sailing for a day. They sailed close to the shore and viewed a land covered by small hills and forest, but Bjarni decided the land was not Greenland and they again moved out to sea.[46] Sailing on for two more days, the men again sited land, this time a flat wooded area, but Bjarni surmised that because there were no glaciers the land was not Greenland and ordered his crew to sail on without putting ashore a landing crew. For three more days the crew sailed, until they reached the next land, which turned out to be covered in high mountains and glaciers but proved uninhabitable. Therefore, Bjarni decided to sail on for four more days until they arrived

at a land that fit the description of Greenland. The crew hugged the shoreline and landed in the evening along a headland known as Herjolfsnes. Approaching the farm, Bjarni learned that he had at last found his father Herjolf, and he and his crew settled down to spend the winter on the farm and began telling others of their adventure.[47]

While historians and archaeologists have been unable to decide whether Leif or Bjarni was actually the first person to lay eyes on America, what is important is that a wayward traveler blown off course saw the shores of America sometime around the end of the 10th century. More important to the subsequent story is the fact that these tales created excitement among the men of Greenland and prompted a number of them to begin to plan an expedition to explore and possibly exploit these new lands. By this time, the powerful chieftains and their subordinates owned or controlled most of the good land in Greenland. Consequently, the next generation of ambitious explorers likely looked upon these new lands as a possible opportunity for riches and maybe even hoped to lead a new landnam in which they might establish themselves as chieftains. This was the probable driving force behind the Vínland voyages and led to what might be the first contact between Native Americans and Europeans.

THE VÍNLAND VOYAGES

Foremost among these proponents for an exploration of the newly discovered western lands were members of Eirik the Red's family. Again, *Eirik the Red's Saga* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders* differ on who receives credit for discovering different lands or engaging in different activities. Together though, the accounts of the Vínland voyages in the sagas give the best descriptions of the first recorded exploration of the New World

and provide several tantalizing tales of interaction between these Norse explorers and Native Americans living in the region. By using these tales in conjunction with both archaeological and historical material, a more complete understanding of how the Europeans and Native Americans viewed each other and related to one another will hopefully emerge.

Eirik the Red's Saga

In *Eirik the Red's Saga*, Leif Eiriksson plays a relatively minor role in the voyages to the New World, and after discovering lands to the west declines, to embark on any further expeditions. His brother Thorstein Eiriksson, however, began to suggest that a party of men should sail west and investigate the lands that Leif inadvertently found. Thorstein convinced his father Eirik to lead the expedition, because of his luck, and gathered a crew of twenty men. Using the ship Thorbjorn had sailed to Greenland, the men loaded supplies, trading goods, armor, and weapons and prepared to embark.[48] En route to the ship, Eirik's horse bucked him and broke some ribs, which prevented Eirik from embarking with the others. Undeterred, Thorstein and his crew set sail from Eiriksfjord, but soon ran into storms, which blew them off course and forced them to turn back. Reaching Eiriksfjord in late autumn, the crew returned to their homes or stayed with Thorstein and Eirik at Brattahlid.[49]

During Thorstein's stay at Brattahlid, he became attracted to Thorbjorn's daughter Gudrid, and after gaining the consent of both her father and Eirik, the two were wed the following autumn. They sailed to Thorstein's farm at Lysufjord in the Western Settlement for the winter. However, as winter set in, disease quickly spread throughout

During the winter, Karlsefni became enamored with Gudrid and asked Eirik for his permission to marry her. Eirik accepted the proposal, and with Gudrid's consent, the two were married.[56] Through this marriage, Karlsefni allied himself to Eirik's family since Gudrid was both Eirik's former daughter-in-law and ward. This placed him in a powerful position within Greenlandic society and likely provided him access to the prestige of the Eiriksson family. Consequently, Karlsefni became the man most qualified to lead an expedition in search of the lands Leif discovered, and rumors started circulating about the possibility of a new western voyage. Eventually, Karlsefni and Snorri decided to take a group of men out in search of the western lands. Bjarni and Thorhall also decided to accompany Karlsefni as did Eirik's youngest son Thorvald Eiriksson and his son-in-law Thorvald, who together supplied a third ship crewed mostly by men from Greenland. Accompanying these Greenlanders was one of Eirik's men known as Thorhall the Hunter who was rather unpopular but had experience in the "uninhabited lands."[57]

Setting out from Brattahlid, the small fleet sailed up the Greenland coast to the Western Settlement and then turned past the Bear Islands and headed out into the open sea. After two days, the crews spotted land and sent men ashore to explore the area. Here they found many flat slabs of stones and, consequently named the land Helluland, or stone-slab land.[58] Returning to their ships, the men once put back out to sea and sailed another two days before they again spotted land. This time, the land appeared heavily forested and was populated with many animals. As a result, the explorers named this region Markland, or forested land. They then pushed out from the shore and sailed on for two more days until they arrived at a peninsula jutting out from a shore marked by long

harborless sections, long beaches, and sandy flats. Sailing down the coast, the men found the keel of a ship and named the spot Kjalarnes or Keel Point. Pushing on, they found numerous inlets, which they sailed in and out of, and decided to send some men ashore to explore the land.[59]

Karlsefni decided to send ashore two Scottish slaves loaned to him by Leif for the expedition. King Olaf of Norway gave the slaves, Haki, a male, and Hekja, a female, to Leif because they were exceptionally fast runners, and after sailing the length of the coast Karlsefni decided to set the two ashore with orders to run southwards and explore the land for three days before returning to the ship.[60] After three days, the Scots returned with handfuls grapes and self-sewn wheat. Such produce greatly excited Karlsefni and the other men and after taking the Scots aboard the ships, they continued to sail along the coast until they reached a fjord that cut into the coast. At the mouth of the fjord lay an island filled with birds and bird eggs, which the explorers dubbed Straumsey, or Stream Island, on account of the strong current in the fjord.[61] Once inside the fjord, the crews began set their ships ashore and began unloading their cargo and livestock and settled into the area. They then sent out parties to explore the land and its resources. These groups of men found nearby mountains and tall grass, but "paid little attention to things other than exploring the land."[62]

That winter, the men stayed in the fjord and suffered through harsh weather "for which they had made little preparation, and they grew short of food and caught nothing when hunting or fishing."[63] Traveling out to the island at the mouth of the fjord, the men hoped to find food. Although they found little in the way of sustenance, the condition of the livestock at least improved on Straumsey. With food resources running increasingly

low, the men turned to God, but received little immediate help. At this point, Thorhall left the settlement and was found by Karlsefni and Bjarni four days later staring at the sky and mumbling. Soon after they located Thorhall, a whale turned up on the beach and, although no one could identify the type of whale, the men quickly set upon the beast and boiled the meat. Everyone partook of the meat and as the men ate, Thorhall said, "Didn't Old Redbeard prove to be more help than your Christ? This was my payment for the poem I composed about Thor, my guardian, who's seldom disappointed me."[64] After this a number of people became sick and no one wanted to eat any more of the whale, so they pushed the carcass off of a nearby cliff. Shortly thereafter, the weather began to improve, allowing the men to go fishing and, thus, to restock their dwindling supplies.[65]

With the coming of spring, the Norsemen moved their camp farther into Straumsfjord and lived off of the produce of the fjord and the hinterland, hunting inland, gathering eggs on the island, and fishing in the sea.[66] As the weather continued to warm, the group started planning the most efficient and productive means of exploring the new land. Thorhall advocated sailing north around Kjalarnes, while Karlsefni thought it more advisable to sail south and east following the coastline. In the end, the men decided to split their forces in order to cover more area. One ship commanded by Thorhall and crewed by nine men sailed north, and Karlsefni and the others headed south to scout on the resources and suitability of the region for settlement.[67] The ship commanded by Thorhall initially made good progress north, but soon ran into heavy storms that swept them up and blew them eastwards. When they finally sighted land again, the men found themselves in Ireland and were soon captured and enslaved by Irishmen in the region.[68]

Fortunately, Karlsefni's expedition faired far better and as the men sailed south they eventually came to a river that flowed into a lake and then into the sea. Sandbars stretched across the mouth of the river, so the men waited until high tide before they steered their ships into the lagoon. They dubbed this lagoon Hóp, or Tidal Pool, and soon began exploring the surrounding hinterland, where they discovered fields of self-sown wheat in the low-lying areas, vines on the hills, and streams teaming with fish.[69] Finding the land exceptionally good, Karlsefni and the other leaders decided to set up camp at Hóp and ordered the unloading of the livestock and supplies. For over a fortnight, the men continued to explore the land, finding nothing out of the ordinary or any danger.[70] Then, early one morning, the men awoke to find nine hide-covered boats lying in the waters off their camp filled with people waving wooden poles that "made a swishing sound as they turned them around sunwise."[71]

This sight must have startled the Norsemen who appear to have had little to no contact with the natives of the region prior to this meeting. In this new land, these people practiced an entirely foreign culture to that of the European Norse, spoke an unintelligible language, and used unknown symbols and customs. Standing face to face for the first time, the meeting likely presented an uncomfortable and tense moment for both parties. According to the sagas, Karlsefni's partner Snorri was the first of the Norsemen to try and make sense of the meeting, suggesting that the waving poles might be a peace sign. Attempting to reciprocate the gesture, Snorri ordered his men to lift up a white shield in reply, which prompted the group of natives to row towards shore and land near the camp.[72] Standing facing each other, the Norse got there first close-up look at the natives, whom the sagas describe as "short in height with threatening features and tangled hair on

their heads. Their eyes were large and their cheeks broad."[73] After several more tense moments, the Native Americans returned to their boats and promptly rowed away to the south of the point.[74]

Despite this encounter, Karlsefni and his men decided to winter in Hóp and soon set to work building buðir above the lake and gathering supplies. When winter arrived, it proved mild enough that the livestock remained outdoors all season to fend for themselves.[75] The winter months passed without any incident worthy of note in the saga. However, with the approach of spring the Norsemen at Hóp once again received a visit from the Native Americans. One morning the inhabitants of Karlsefni's camp awoke to find a large number of hide-covered boats approaching from the south. "There were so many of them that it looked as if bits of coal had been tossed over the water, and there was a pole waving from each boat."[76] Hoping to again make friendly contact, the Norseman signaled to the approaching natives with their shields, prompting the men to come ashore and begin trading. As the economic exchange began, it soon became apparent that the natives greatly sought red cloth, swords, and spears, but Karlsefni strictly forbade the selling of the latter two items. Instead, "They [the natives] traded a dark pelt for the cloth and for each pelt they took cloth a hand in length, which they bound about their heads."[77] When the red cloth became scarce, the Norse simply cut it into smaller quantities and continued to receive one pelt per piece of cloth. Unfortunately for the Norse merchants, this lucrative exchange came to a sudden close when a bull ran out of the woods and scared off the Native Americans, who ran for their boats and quickly rowed away.[78]

After this encounter, the Norse saw nothing of the natives for about three weeks, until one day a large group of them was sighted rowing up from the south. This time, however, the men waved their poles counter-sunwise and shrieked loud cries.[79] Interpreting this as a war party, the Norse quickly armed, took up their red shields, and prepared for their defense. As the Native Americans reached the shoreline, the Norse met them and engaged them in battle. "A hard barrage rained down and the natives also had catapults. Karlsefni and Snorri then saw the natives lift up on poles a large round object, about the size of a sheep's gut and black in color, which came flying up on the land and made a threatening noise when it landed."[80] Fearing this new weapon and the growing number of natives, the Norsemen decided to flee up the river while fending off attacks on all sides. Once they reached a cliff that prevented their running any farther, the men turned and put up a stiff resistance that held the attacking Native Americans off. Back at the camp, Eirik's pregnant daughter Freydis found herself abandoned as she could not keep up with the fleeing men. She followed her countrymen into the forest as long as she could, but eventually had to stop. Chastising the men for their cowardice, Freydis took a sword from Thorbrand Snorrason, who was killed by a stone to the head, and waited for advancing natives. The sight of a pregnant woman preparing to attack apparently amused or scared the Native Americans, and they suddenly broke off their offensive, returned to their boats, and rowed away.[81]

Returning to their camp, the men praised Freydis for her bravery and found that, despite the apparent strength of the attack, only two Norsemen were dead compared to a much larger number of fallen natives.[82] During the battle, one of the attackers managed to steal a coveted axe from one of the dead Norsemen and received note in the saga.

"One of them picked up the axe and chopped at a tree, and then each took his turn at it. They thought this thing which cut so well a real treasure. One of them struck a stone, and the axe broke. He thought a thing which could not withstand stone to be of little worth, and tossed it away."[83] Despite this rather disdainful assessment of the native's intellect, the Norsemen surmised that the Native Americans in the region were too powerful for their camp to remain safe. Consequently, they made preparations to depart and sailed north along the coast and away from the perceived danger.[84]

As they sailed north, the men encountered five Native Americans sleeping in skin sacks by the shore. Assuming the men were outlaws, the Norsemen ambushed and killed the party, possibly in revenge for the previous attack on their camp.[85] Eventually, the group arrived back at Straumsfjord, which still had plenty of stores of provisions.[i] While the majority of the men remained at Straumsfjord, Karlsefni and a small party sailed north in search of Thorhall and his men, but they saw only tracts of forest and found no sign of the missing men.[86] After several days, the men sighted a river flowing from East to West and sailed up it. Seeing something shiny above a clearing, the men called out and to their surprise a one-legged creature darted down the slope toward the ship. Thorvald Eiriksson was at the helm of the ship, and as the one-legged man approached, he fired an arrow into Thorvald's stomach before disappearing again into the woods. Thorvald pulled out the arrow and attempted to dress the wound, but to no avail.[87]

Undeterred by Thorvald's death, the men continued sailing north until they were as far north as Hóp was south. They then turned their ships around and headed back to

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[i] The saga mentions that "Some people say Bjarni and Gudrid had remained behind there [Straumsfjord] with a hundred others and gone no farther, and that it was Karlsefni and Snorri who went further south with some forty men, stayed no more than two months at Hop and returned that same summer." (*Eirik the Red's Saga*, 16)

Straumsfjord to spend their third winter in the New World. During the winter, fighting and bickering began to break out between those men who were without their wives and those whose wives had accompanied them. Having been in America for three years now, many of the men became restless and anxious to return to their families and homes. Consequently, as spring approached, Karlsefni ordered preparations made for the voyage back to Greenland.[88]

On their way back to Greenland, the flotilla stopped along the coast of Markland and encountered five Native Americans: one man, two women, and two boys. Attacking the group, the Norsemen managed to capture the two boys, but the remainder of the group escaped by "disappearing into the earth."[89] Happy with their catch, the Norse took the adolescents with them, taught them their language, and baptized them into Christianity. The young men were then questioned about the inhabitants of their homeland. "They called their mother Vethild and their father Ovaegi. They said that kings ruled the land of the natives; one of them was called Avaldamon and the other Valdidida. No houses were there, they said, but people slept in caves or holes. They spoke of another land, across from their own. There people dressed in white clothing, shouted loudly and bore poles and waved banners."[90] With a better understanding of the land to the west and the people that inhabited the region, the Karlsefni and his men continued their push north and soon reached the familiar waters of Greenland. Arriving at Brattahlid, the men unloaded their ships and spent the winter with Eirik, likely recounting the deeds that would eventually become *Eirik the Red's Saga* during the long winter nights.[91]

The Saga of the Greenlanders

In contrast to *Eirik the Red's Saga*, the *Saga of the Greenlanders* describes several different voyages to Vínland by different groups of explorers and provides more detailed descriptions of Norse-Native American interactions.[ii] The events in the *Saga of the Greenlanders* begin with Leif Eiriksson seeking out Bjarni, whom the saga credits with finding the lands to the west. Leif purchased Bjarni's ship and hired a crew of thirty-five men with the intent of mounting an expedition to find and explore the lands Bjarni sighted to the west of Greenland.[92] They convinced Eirik the Red to lead the expedition on account of his good luck, but on his way to the ship he fell off of his horse and broke his foot, preventing him from joining the expedition. This left Leif as the commander of the voyage and, accompanied by a servant from the southern countries known as Tyrkir, he soon set sail and left Greenland.[93]

As described in *Eirik the Red's Saga*, the men discovered Helluland and Markland.[94] However, in the *Saga of the Greenlanders* it was Leif and not Karlsefni—who does not even participate in the voyage—who discovered and named all of the lands. Sailing two days past Markland, Leif's men sighted a third land with an island lying to the north of it. Sending boats to explore this northern island, the crew discovered grass growing across the small stretch of land and collected fresh water to drink. They then returned to their ship and sailed into the sound that lay between the island and the larger stretch of land. Eventually they became stranded on a sandbar on account of the low tide, and not wishing to wait for the tide to come back in, abandoned their ship and ran ashore to explore the land. Inland, the men found a river running into the sea from a lake and

[ii] In the *Saga of the Greenlanders* many of the same characters seen in *Eirik the Red's Saga* reoccur. However, these characters play slightly different roles and participate in somewhat different events.

when high tide returned Leif's crew rowed their ship up this river, anchoring the vessel in the nearby lake.[95]

With the ship secured, the men went ashore and began preparing a camp and constructed buðir. Finding the land exceptionally well suited to habitation, with streams full of salmon and a temperate climate for the livestock, Leif and his men decided to stay at their camp for the winter. After finishing the construction of the camp, Leif decided to send his men out to explore the surrounding lands, keeping half the men in the camp at all times. He also issued explicit rules, forbidding anyone from leaving the group while exploring and mandating that each party return back to camp on the same day.[96] Sometimes, Leif chose to personally lead these forays into the hinterlands, while other times he remained in the relative safety of the camp. One evening, when the exploration party returned, a messenger informed Leif that Tyrkir was missing, which greatly upset Leif greatly because Tyrkir was a servant of his family and had assisted in his upbringing. Consequently, Leif quickly organized a search party of twelve men and left the camp in search of Tyrkir. As the group entered the woods, they met Tyrkir returning to camp, and Leif demanded to know why he was late. Tyrkir explained that he had only gone a little bit further than the rest of the men, but that on his journey he discovered wild grapes and produced a handful of the fruit as evidence.[97]

Elated by the discovery, Leif ordered his men to alternately devote one day to collecting grapes and vines and the other for felling trees for lumber to take back to Greenland. With the approach of spring, Leif's men loaded up their ship with lumber and filled the towboat drawn behind the ship with grapevines. They set sail for Greenland, and Leif dubbed the land Vínland, or Wineland, on account of the abundance of grapes.[98]

En route, Leif spotted and rescued a group of Norwegians stranded on a skerry. Reaching Brattahlid safely, Leif invited the commander of the rescued Norwegians Thorir and his wife Gudrid to stay with him and found lodging for the rest of their men. Unfortunately, that winter Thorir and the majority of his crew became ill and died. Eirik the Red also died, leaving Leif as Greenland's most powerful chieftain.[99]

As word spread about the success of Leif's voyage and the wealth in lumber and grapes it produced, people began expressing an interest in mounting further expeditions to the west. Foremost among those eager to sail to the west was Thorvald Eiriksson, Leif's brother.[100] Leif offered to allow Thorvald the use of his ship, after he retrieved the cargo left on the skerry by Thorir and the Norwegians, and helped him prepare for the journey. Thorvald soon succeeded in enlisting thirty men for the journey and set sail with this crew and his wife, reaching Vínland without stopping along the way. Upon reaching Vínland, Thorvald ordered his men to unload the ship and then settled into Leif's still existent camp for the winter.[101]

Thorvald sent several men west to explore the land during the following summer. These men reported that they found good land with endless tracts of forest, white sand beaches, many small islands, and wide stretches of shallow sea. In addition, "Nowhere did they see signs of men or animals. On one of the westerly islands they did find a wooden grain trough, but discovered no other works by human hands. . . ."[102] Encouraged by these reports, Thorvald and his men decided to stay in Leif's buðir another winter, and with the approach of spring again set off to explore the land, this time sailing east. Thorvald decided to personally command the expedition, which soon ran into stormy weather that caused the ship to run aground, smashing the keel. Forced to

spend a considerable amount of time repairing the keel, Thorvald ordered the broken keel raised up at the point where his ship had gone ashore, naming the spot Kjalarnes or Keel Point.[103]

Undeterred by this setback, Thorvald and his crew continued sailing east and entered the mouth of the next fjord they spotted. They soon reached a forest-covered cape and decided to go ashore and explore the land. Thorvald was so taken with the land that he commented, "This is an attractive spot, and here I would like to build my farm."[104] Heading back to their ship, the men discovered three "hillocks" on the beach inland from the cape turned out to be hide-covered boats. Underneath each of these vessels, Thorvald and his men found three natives. They captured and promptly executed eight of the men. Now aware of the presence of Native Americans, the Norsemen quickly hurried to their ship. "On surveying the area they saw a number of hillocks further up the fjord, and assumed them to be settlements."[105]

Despite the apparent danger in the region, the men decided to stay at the ship and soon all fell asleep. A voice soon woke Thorvald, however, and warned him to quickly leave the area. Looking down the fjord, Thorvald saw a large number of hide-covered boats coming towards his ship and ordered his men to quickly build breastworks alongside the ship and prepare for their defense.[106] From their boats, the natives shot at the Norse for awhile, but never attempted a landing and soon left. Thorvald called out to his men, inquiring whether any of them were injured. None of his crew had received any serious wound, but Thorvald had been hit in the armpit by an arrow and soon died. The men buried Thorvald at the site he hoped would one day be his farm and erected a cross at the head and foot of his grave, calling the spot Krossanes, or Cross Point. Then they

returned to the ship and quickly left the cape before the Native Americans returned for a second attack.[107] Returning to the camp, the men related to their comrades what had happened and decided to remain in America for the winter. Loading their ship with grapes and grapevines the following spring, they set sail early in the season and returned to Eiriksfjord where they informed Leif of his brother's death.[108]

During the three years that Thorvald's crew spent in Vínland, the youngest of Eirik the Red's sons, Thorstein, married Gudrid Thorbjornsdottir, the wife of the Thorir the Norwegian who Leif rescued from the skerry. Thorstein decided to travel to Vínland to retrieve his brother's body and prepared the same ship and hired twenty-five men for the trip. He set out with his wife Gudrid accompanying him, but soon ran into bad weather. Unable to reach Vínland, the crew landed at Lysufjord in the Western Settlement in the first week of winter.[109] As related in *Eirik the Red's Saga*, Thorstein and his men stayed in the Western Settlement during the winter and were struck down by a sickness that killed much of the crew. Gudrid survived, however, and with the help of Thorstein the Farmer, who had provided lodging for Thorstein Eiriksson and Gudrid, she took the body of Thorstein Eiriksson and his deceased crewmen back to Eiriksfjord for burial in the churchyard. Gudrid then took up residence at Brattahlid under the protection of Leif.[110]

That same summer a ship captained by Thorfin Karlsefni sailed from Norway to Greenland and docked outside of Brattahlid. Karlsefni was a wealthy man and spent the winter at Brattahlid as a guest of Leif. During his stay, he fell in love with Gudrid and the two were married with Leif's blessing.[111] That winter, talk turned again to a voyage to Vínland, and Gudrid and others began to pressure Karlsefni to undertake the

expedition. Eventually, he agreed and hired a crew of sixty men and five women and made an agreement to divide equally the value of whatever was gained equally among the expedition members. The expedition took with them livestock with the understanding that if the conditions proved advantageous they would attempt to settle in Vínland.[112] Before they set off, Karlsefni asked Leif for his Vínland houses, but Leif refused. Instead he offered to loan them to the group, retaining personal ownership.[113]

In the spring, the group set out to sea and arrived without incident at Leif's camp, where they unloaded their ship and moved into the buðir. Finding a whale on the nearby beach, the group soon had ample supplies and loosed their livestock to roam into the interior to forage for food. With the food and livestock provided for, Karlsefni ordered his men to begin falling trees and hewing them for lumber, placing them on rocks near camp to dry. Foraging parties also procured large amounts of grapes, fish, and game to supplement the supplies of camp.[114] Hunting and gathering thus provided the people with a relatively easy lifestyle and kept the Norsemen with plenty of food.

After their first winter in Vínland, the Norsemen became aware of Native Americans living in the area. During their second summer, a large group of men suddenly appeared out of the woods close to the cattle pasture, but soon became scared when the bull started to bellow. Attempting to flee from the bull, the Native Americans ran towards Karlsefni's farm and tried to gain entrance into the house, but Karlsefni and his men defended the door. At first, neither group understood the intentions of the other and tensions likely remained high.[115] The natives soon set down and opened their packs, offering to trade the pelts, sables, and other skins for weapons, but Karlsefni strictly forbade such exchanges. Instead, he ordered the women to bring milk and milk products

and offered these in exchange for the Native American wares. The natives eagerly traded for the dairy products and soon had traded all of their goods and left.[116] Fearing the possibility of an attack from the Native Americans, Karlsefni had a palisade built around his farm.[117]

Shortly after the first visit by the Native Americans, Gudrid gave birth to a boy named Snorri, the first European born in the America. The rest of the summer past without incident, but near the beginning of the second winter the Native Americans returned and in greater numbers. Karlsefni ordered the women to again bring forth dairy goods for trade and the natives threw their packs of furs over the palisade wall in exchange for the milk products.[118] While this peaceful trading occurred, one of Karlsefni's servants broke the harmony by killing a native who tried to steal a weapon. This caused the rest of the Native Americans to flee, leaving their goods behind.[119] Fearing that the men would soon return to exact revenge, the Norsemen began planning the best strategy for defending their camp. They developed a plan in which ten men would go to the headland and make themselves visible to the Native Americans, while everyone else went into the forest a cut a clearing for the cattle and prepared for battle.[120]

The Native Americans soon returned and engaged the Norsemen in battle. A large number of the natives died. One native man was observed picking up an axe and striking a comrade with it. Seeing that it killed his countryman, he ". . . examined it awhile and then threw it as far out into the sea as he could."[121] In a short period of time the battle ended with the Native Americans fleeing back to where they originally came. After this, the Norsemen saw no more of the natives. Karlsefni and his men remained in their camp throughout the winter, but in the spring decided to return back to Greenland.

They took with them a cargo full of grapevines, berries, and skins and safely arrived in Eiriksfjord.[122]

Seeing the bounty of goods brought back by Karlsefni's group, Freydis Eiriksdottir decided to mount the last major expedition to Vínland recorded in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*. She contacted two Icelandic brothers named Helgi and Finnbogi and proposed that they enter into an agreement to sail to Vínland and share the profits of the voyage equally. Each group agreed to take a crew of thirty men, but Freydis soon broke her word and hired an additional five men to accompany her on the trip.[123] As the flotilla set sail, Helgi and Finnbogi became separated from Freydis, arrived at Leif's camp before her, and began to move their equipment into some of the buðir. Upon arriving, however, Freydis claimed Leif had loaned *her* the buðir and ordered the brothers and their crews out. Without anywhere to stay, the brothers ordered their men to construct longhouses farther back from the sea as Freydis set her men to work felling trees and loading her ship. That winter the parties split and kept to themselves.[124] Then one day, Freydis convinced her husband Thorvald and his men to attack the camp of Helgi and Finnbogi, capturing and killing the men in the early morning while they still lay in their beds. Freydis then personally executed the remaining women and threatened to kill anyone who spoke of the event again. Early in the spring, Freydis ordered her crew to load both ships with the lumber and other goods collected in Vínland and successfully sailed back to Eiriksfjord where she claimed that Helgi and Finnbogi had voluntarily stayed in Vínland. Eventually, word of what actually occurred leaked out and Freydis became a social outcaste, although she received no direct punishment.[125]

The Culture and Society of the Vínland Settlements

This last voyage by Freydis Eiriksdottir marked the end of the Vínland expeditions recorded in the sagas. The descriptions of these voyages, as seen above, differ between *Eirik the Red's Saga* and the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, and researchers such as Ólafur Halldórsson suggested that the two sagas have a different purpose—with the *Saga of the Greenlanders* providing a historic record of the Vínland voyages and *Eirik the Red's Saga* paying homage to Gudrid and her descendents. Others believe that the one voyage to Vínland recounted in *Eirik the Red's Saga* represents a condensed form of all four expeditions told of in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*.[126] For the scope of this paper, it does not particularly matter what the purpose was behind the composition of each of the sagas. What matters is what the sagas can tell researchers about the depicted events and what can be learned about the relationship between the Norse and Native Americans.

Culturally, the sagas provide clues about the structure of the brief Norse society established in the buðir and camps of America that go beyond what archaeologists can infer from artifacts alone. Like Greenland society, the Vínland community was probably stratified, with chieftains or other powerful individuals leading each expedition, sometimes in partnership with ship-owning merchants. Consequently, the chieftains stood at the top of the social ladder followed closely by their business partners, as evidenced in the relationship between Karlsefni and the merchants Snorri Thorbrandsson, Bjarni Grimolfsson, and Thorhall Gumlason in *Eirik the Red's Saga*.[127] While Karlsefni was the overall commander of the expedition and made many of the important decisions, he also turned to Snorri, Bjarni, and Thorhall for advice and often relied upon them to command various parts of the crew in his absence. Each of these leaders typically

Figure 5.

A 1669 Copy of the 1570 Skálholt Map, which depicts the Medieval perception of Greenland, Helluland, Markland, and Vínland

Wallace, "Archaeological Interpretation of Vínland Sagas," 229.

Chieftains in Greenland derived much of their power through their ability to impress both the members of their households and their fellow chieftains. Vínland offered the possibility of controlling such luxury goods as grapes, which could be made into wine, highly sought-after commodity in the sub-Arctic regions of the North Atlantic where vineyards were impossible to grow.[134] Consequently, men from Greenland were willing to risk the voyage to Vínland and spend several years in a foreign land away from their families in the hopes of gaining wealth and prestige.

Archeological Excavations at L'Anse Aux Meadows: A Norse site in North America

These then were the probable factors that motivated men to travel to Vínland, but did Vínland really exist and did the Norse actually travel to America? Are these stories simply legends recorded in the sagas? Until recently scholars hotly debated the issue of whether or not the Norse really did travel to America, and as Columbus Day can attest, most Americans accepted the "fact" that Christopher Columbus was the first European to "discover" America. But in 1960, Helge Ingstad and his wife Anne discovered a Norse settlement site on Épaves Bay in northern Newfoundland near the small fishing community of L'Anse Aux Meadows. Between 1961 and 1968, Helge Ingstad and a number of other researchers organized seven archaeological excavations at L'Anse Aux Meadows.[135]

Newfoundland is roughly the same size as Iceland and lies about 2,200 kilometers from the Western Settlement in Greenland (Figure 6.). From the sea, the site closely resembles a fjord, and researchers located a number of Norse houses on a terrace 100 meters inland from the shore and encircling a sedge peat bog.[136] Researches found three

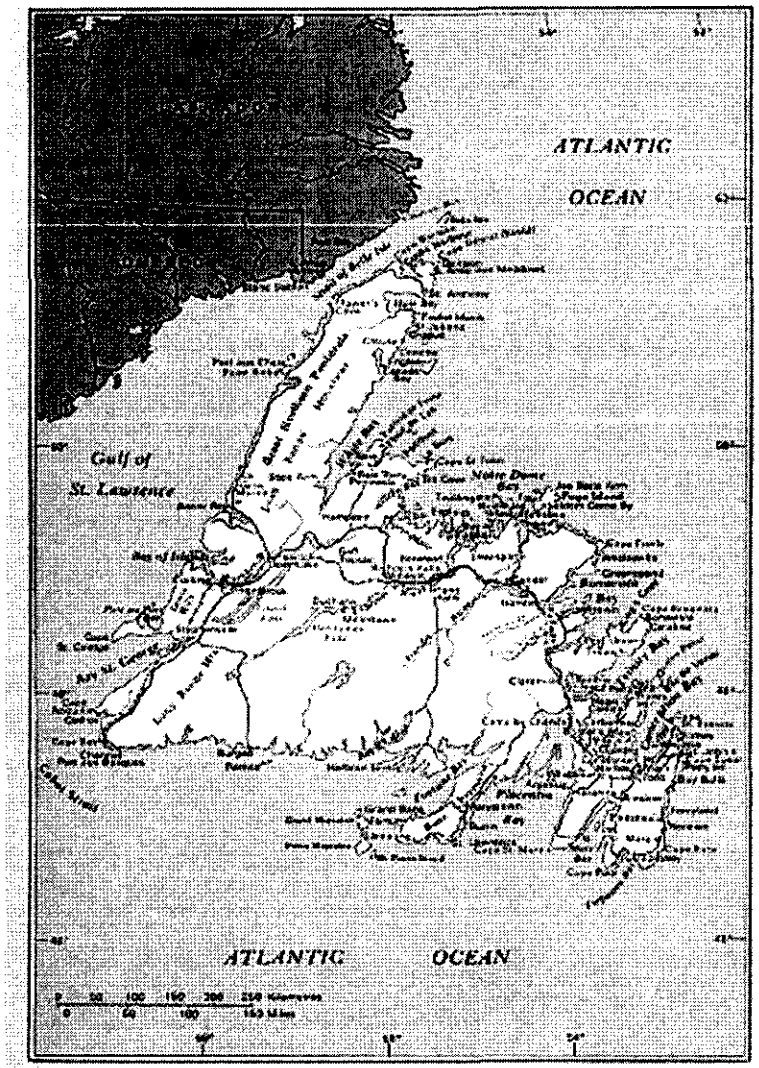


Figure 6.

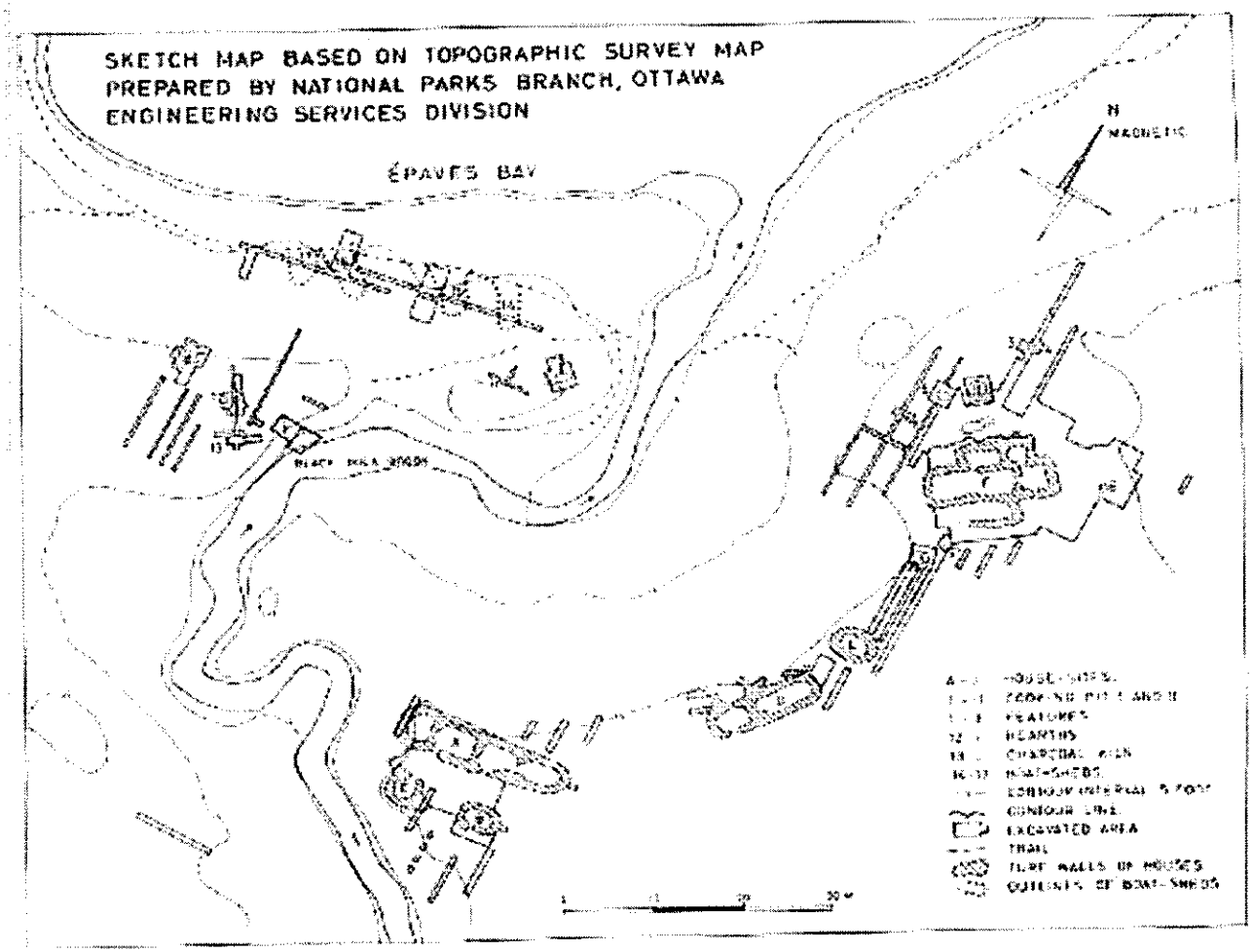
Map of Modern-Day Newfoundland

Rowe, n.p.

distinct building complexes in a north-south line along the terrace. Each complex consisted of a hall and a hut (Figure 7.).[137] Initially, these structures likely began as buðir, or simple sod walls with a tent roof, but when the Norsemen decided to winter at the spot they constructed the more extensive and insulated halls.[138] Inside the halls, the Norse built benches along the sidewalls and a hearth in the middle of the floor. Some evidence exists wood paneling covered a few of the walls.[139] Sitting away from the other buildings, the researchers located a hut that apparently served the purpose of manufacturing iron. All of the buildings were made of sod placed over a timber frame, with the three halls exhibiting straight end walls and evenly rounded outside corners (Figure 8.). The largest of the halls had six rooms and a shed and held up to thirty-two people. Archaeologists believe that the even spacing of the buildings suggests the Norsemen constructed them all at the same time and on the same expedition.[140]

As work progressed at L'Anse Aux Meadows, the researchers sought to determine from what period the site dated from in order to positively connect it with the Vínland voyages described in the sagas. Eventually, the archaeologists succeeded in dating a number of the structures to sometime during the early 11th century from twenty-one radiocarbon dates taken from charcoal deposits, the turf walls, and one fragment of a whale bone.[iii] Archaeological evidence provided further indications of the age of the settlement. Researchers working at the site found no soap-stone artifacts other than a spindle whorl (Figure 9.). The relative absence of soapstone objects suggests that the Greenlanders had not yet discovered the large soapstone deposits in Greenland which they later used extensively, suggesting the settlement was occupied during the early

[iii] The radiocarbon dates range from A.D. 640+/-130 to A.D. 1080+/-70, with the mean date at A.D. 920+/-30. This likely results from the use of driftwood that predates the site (Ingstad 1985, 255).



Pl. 2

Figure 7.

Map of the Archaeological Site at L'Anse Aux Meadows

Ingstad, Appendix.

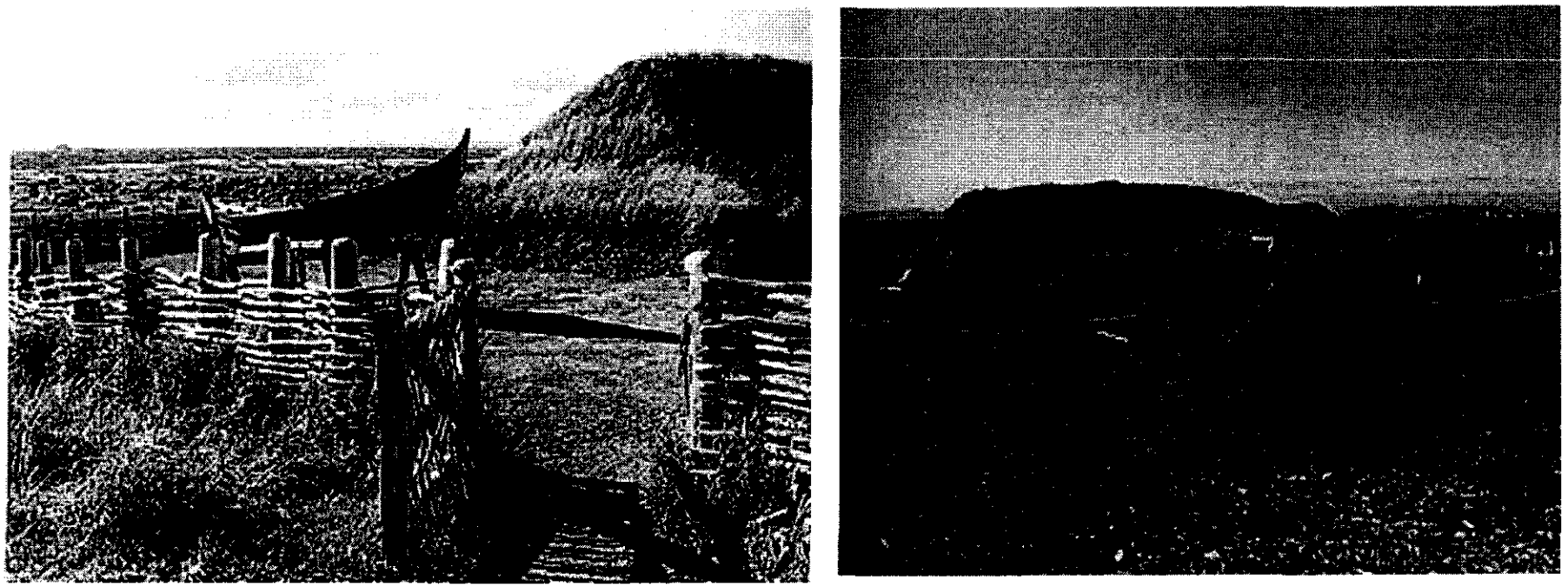


Figure 8.

Reconstructions of Norse Sod Houses at L'Anse Aux Meadows

Peter Schlederman, "A.D. 1000 East Meets West," p. 189-192 in *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 2000), 190. Birgitta Linderoth Wallace, "The Viking Settlement at L'Anse Aux Meadows," p. 208-216 in *Viking: The North Atlantic Saga* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 2000), 215.

Fig. 103. The spindle whorl from house-site F (bottom) together with a spindle whorl from a Norse farm in Greenland (top). Scale 1 : 1. Photo: P. Maurseth.

Figure 9.

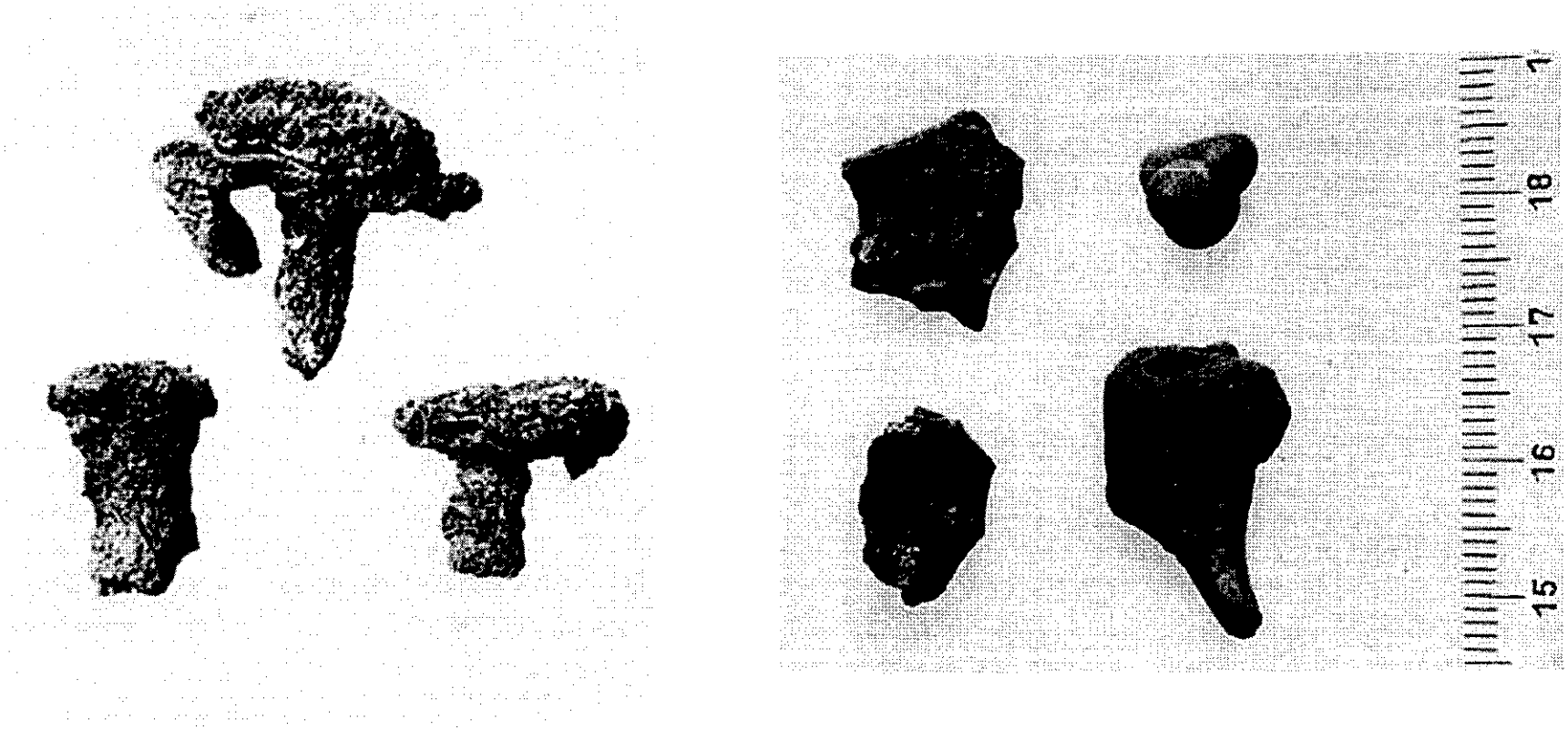
Soapstone Spindle Whorl from L'Anse Aux Meadows

Ingstad, 205-206.

period of the Norse western settlements.[141] A bronze ring-headed pin dated to the sometime during the 9th or 10th centuries provided further evidence for the Norse inhabiting the site during the early period of the Greenland settlement.[142] Through these radiocarbon dates and the archaeological evidence, the researchers succeeded in obtaining a probable date for the site during the first decades of the 11th century, which fits into the time frame of the sagas.

With the probable date of the site established, the researchers next turned their focus toward attempting to understand the cultural context and lifestyle of the inhabitants of L'Anse Aux Meadows. The archaeologists began by comparing the style of houses and placement of the hearths with those found throughout the North Atlantic region. They found that the house structures at L'Anse Aux Meadows closely resembled those from Iceland, but several distinct features existed that resembled those emerging in the new colony of Greenland. Consequently, the people who built the settlement of L'Anse Aux Meadows likely came from the early period of the Greenland and were still influenced by Icelandic culture but also developing their own distinct techniques.[143]

In addition to the few organic tools found by archaeologists at L'Anse Aux Meadows, the Norsemen in Vínland used iron objects, as evidenced by over ninety-eight fragments of iron nail (Figure 10., A). Inhabitants of the site apparently smelted their own iron in the previously mentioned hut that researchers found set aside from the other buildings. Here archaeologists found a primitive smelting furnace and small traces of smelting slag of local bog iron, indicating the Norsemen collected and smelted their own iron on site (Figure 10., B). Further evidence of smithing slag was found in the southern complex of the site where the blacksmith probably forged the bog iron into actual nails



A B

Figure 10.

Iron Nail Fragments (A) and Slag (B) from L'Anse Aux Meadows

Ingstad 162 (A) and Appendix (B).

and other iron objects.[144] These nails were probably used to build houses at L'Anse Aux Meadows and to repair corroded nails on the ships used by the Norse in the exploration ventures. Archaeologists discovered the floor board of a small boat along with wood shavings and logs cut by a broad axe in the peat bog at the site, which strengthen the idea that men worked at repairing ships at the site.[145]

Finally, the Norsemen at L'Anse Aux Meadows apparently brought with them livestock from Greenland. Pollen samples taken from the site suggest that meadows surrounded the settlement and may represent one of the factors which lured the Norse to settle in the region. Within the assemblage of artifacts discovered at the site, researchers also located two fragments of what are probably domesticated pig bones and a small soapstone whorl for weaving (Figure 9.).[146] While the pig bones might derive from supplies of salted pork brought along with the explorers, it is unlikely that they would bring wool and whorls along in the limited cargo space of their ships. Two irregular round enclosures marked by low turf walls found near one of the houses provide further indication of the use of livestock because they may represent animal pens. Other walls that connect three of the house structures at the site could be another type of animal corral.[147] Consequently, it seems that the settlers of L'Anse Aux Meadows did keep livestock as described in the sagas, building them pens and allowing them to feed in the rich meadows of the surrounding land.

With a better understanding of the date range and cultural characteristics of the site, the question remains, was L'Anse Aux Meadows mentioned in the Vínland Sagas? Birgitta Wallace Ferguson believes that L'Anse Aux Meadows is the Straumsfjord and to some extent the Leifsbuðir described in *Eirik the Red's Saga* and the *Saga of the*

Greenlanders. Like the description of Straumsfjord, L'Anse Aux Meadows lies in a region with tall grass, mild winters, plenty of game, and an off-shore island crowded with birds.[148] L'Anse Aux Meadows apparently supported between seventy and ninety people, a significant population considering that the entire colony of Greenland probably included only 500 people. Consequently, it is unlikely that such a sizeable settlement would be excluded from the sagas dealing specifically with the Vínland voyages.[149] Leifsbuðir represents a less likely candidate for L'Anse Aux Meadows simply because it appears to represent elements of both Straumsfjord and Hóp condensed into one site.[150] Hóp, on the other hand, probably existed further south than L'Anse Aux Meadows, most likely in the area of northeastern New Brunswick.[151] It most likely existed as a summer camp with few permanent buildings and, consequently left little archaeological evidence. Fragments of butternut found in the bog at L'Anse Aux Meadows attest to the fact that the inhabitants of the site traveled south because the walnut species only grows as far north as the St. Lawrence River. Grapevines grow in the same areas as these butternuts and the Norsemen probably made frequent trips from L'Anse Aux Meadows to acquire both products, as mention of grapes frequently occur in the sagas.[152]

In light of the above cited evidence, L'Anse Aux Meadows may indeed be the Straumsfjord described in sagas and may represent the first European settlement in North America. However, what is more important is that it is undoubtedly a Norse site dating from the period described in the sagas, which proves that the Norse indeed traveled to the shores of North America. While evidence suggests that the Norse only briefly inhabited the site—there is no evidence of rebuilding and the cultural material exists only in a thin level—the exploration of Vínland provided the Norse of Greenland with the opportunity

to assess the coast of America and to determine the feasibility of settling the new land.[153] These voyages, according to the sagas also brought the Norse into contact with Native Americans living along the coast of modern-day Canada.

THE NATIVE AMERICANS OF VÍNLAND

The sagas relate that when the Norsemen explored the coast of North America they occasionally came into contact with Native Americans. Sometimes these encounters proved outright hostile, while other instances provided opportunities for trade. While descriptions such as the meeting between Thorstein Eiriksson and the one-legged man described in *Eirik the Red's Saga* seem to be fanciful accounts of the inhabitants of America, for the most part the sagas relate stories that provide the best textual record of the first known meetings between Europeans and Native Americans. Therefore, these stories are here compared with archaeological and historical data on the prehistoric inhabitants of the Canadian coast in order to gain a better and more complete picture of how the Norse and Native Americans interacted.

When the Greenland Norse first began to sail west in search of the new land, there existed along the seaboard of Eastern Canada a number of coastal hunting people who shared a relatively similar culture throughout the central Labrador, Newfoundland, and northern St. Lawrence Gulf regions.[154] Archaeologically speaking, however, these prehistoric peoples represent a number of different complexes and cultures, which are briefly outlined and described below.

The Point Revenge Complex

In modern day central Labrador, generally accepted as the region the Norse called Markland, there lived a people known to archaeology as the Point Revenge Complex (Figure 11.). Researchers originally defined the complex from several small components along the North West River and in Groswater Bay. The sites dated between A.D. 1000 and A.D. 1300 and contained small but consistent assemblages of Ramah Chert and distinctive house and hearth forms.[155] Settlement patterns of the Point Revenge Complex suggest that the people utilized both riverine and coastal sites, likely during the spring and fall. During the winter, people probably moved upland and inland to the best caribou hunting locations. Typologically, Point Revenge parallels Middle Woodland lithics in the Northeast, which strongly suggests an Indian rather than Inuit affiliation for the Point Revenge people. Many researchers believe that the Point Revenge Complex gave rise to the later Montagnais and Naskapi cultures from historic times.[156]

Winter Cove 4 represents a relatively typical Point Revenge Complex site in Labrador. Located in Winter Cove, a small harbor at the northeast edge of Groswater Bay, the site was situated on the intersection of east-west and north-south coastal routes and likely served as a common meeting place and staging ground for travel and hunting.[157] Excavation at the site revealed a four meter by eight meter oval tent ring with a large hearth near its center.[158] At the site, archaeologists discovered 188 tools and 5,000 flakes of which ninety-eight percent were made of Ramah Chert. The Point Revenge people likely obtained this distinctive chert from quarries in northern Labrador and evidence exists that they used the material frugally, indicated by the high frequency of broken and discarded tools and the rarity of large unworked flakes.[159] Within two of

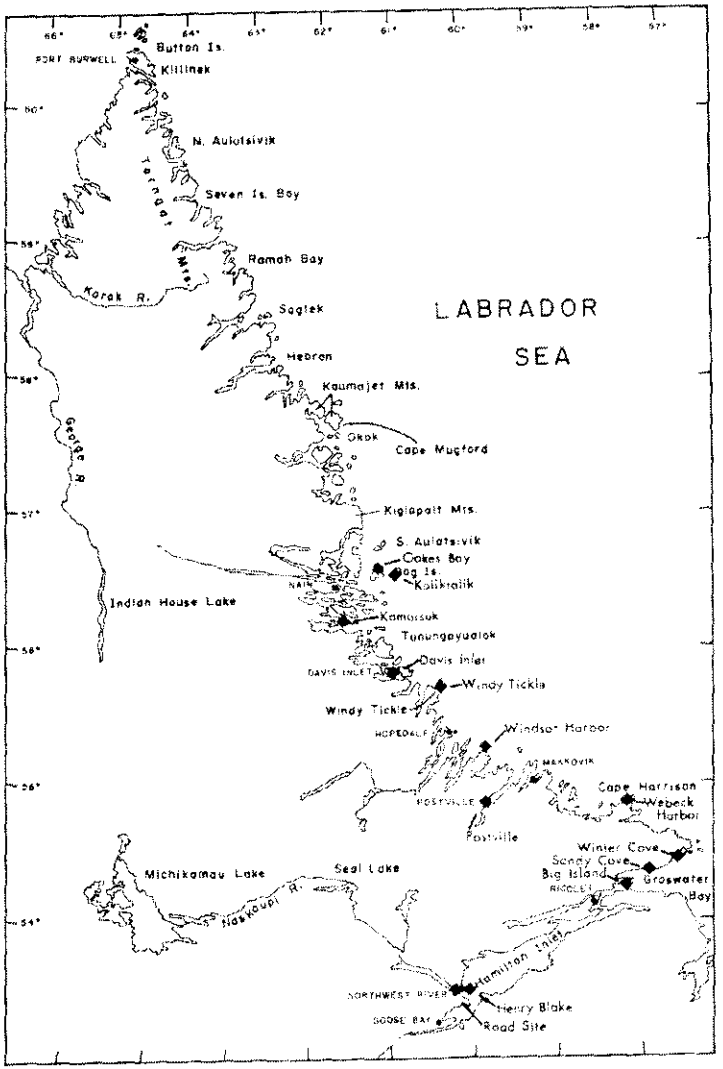


Figure 11.

Map of Major Point Revenge Complex Sites in Labrador

Fitzhugh, 148.

the small cooking hearths found at the site, archaeologists recovered bones from a caribou and an unidentified bird. Many such hearths existed at the site suggesting that each hearth had a different function, such as ritual renewal, changing wind patterns, or restrictions against cooking different animals in the same hearth.[160]

The layout of the dwelling at Winter Cove 4 possessed a striking similarity to the historic Montagnais and Naskapi *shaputuana*, one of two types of skin-covered lodges used by northern Algonquians between spring and fall. Most settlements possessed at least one shaputuana—a pole-framed structure with a caribou skin covering that usually had two or three central hearths—when the people intended to stay in the area for an extended period of time. More commonly, people built *tshistwehigantshop*, the basic single family dwelling that consisted of a conical frame covered by a skin.[161] Parallels between the Point Revenge and Montagnais-Naskapi structures suggest that these houses probably resembled each other both visually and in function. Through research at Winter Cove 4, archaeologists gained an idea of what a fairly typical Point Revenge site probably looked like. There would have been at least one conical frame tshistwehigantshop, and if it was a larger or more permanent settlement, perhaps a shaputuana as well. Scattered around these structures, people likely would be seen cooking or warming themselves by a number of different fires, knapping tools out of Ramah chert, or going about their daily routine of subsistence hunting and gathering.

Through the distribution of Point Revenge sites, it appears that these prehistoric people occupied the coastal region of Labrador from Blanc Sablon in the south to Nain in the north and as far west as Northwest River in Hamilton Inlet. Sites also probably occur in the more interior regions, but archaeological evidence for such an occupation remains

scant.[162] The earliest date recorded for the Point Revenge Complex is A.D. 370 ± 70 from a site at Windy Tickle, but this date remains suspect in the minds of many researchers. Most archaeologists agree, however, that the Point Revenge Complex began to spread in central Labrador centuries before A.D. 1000 and probably occupied the region continuously from at least A.D. 450 until the historic period.[163] During this extended period of occupation, the material culture of the Point Revenge Complex changed relatively little. Points remained stylistically the same, but over time the notches became deeper and narrower and moved from the side to the corner or base. Unifacial points and points made from flakes also appeared more frequently during the latter Point Revenge period, and the points became generally more triangular, narrower, thinner, and smaller.[164] This relatively conservative material culture suggests cultural continuity and stability throughout the Point Revenge Complex's existence.

By looking at the distribution of all known Point Revenge sites, archaeologists succeeded in developing a theoretical model of their subsistence strategies. In general, Point Revenge sites are located in a variety of coastal areas, including the inner estuaries, bays, islands, and rivers, but seldom on the outer islands. It appears that the people preferred to settle near the mouths of bays and headlands in areas protected from the open ocean that still afforded access to coastal trading and hunting.[165] Typically these sites possessed one or two tent rings, which imply an occupation of the site by a relatively small group of people engaged in hunting, fishing, or trading activities. The small size of the settlements and light scatter of cultural material further suggests that people inhabited the sites only for a few weeks before moving on.[166] Consequently, many researchers

believe the Point Revenge people engaged in an economy designed to maximize the potential of their environment through seasonal exploitation of certain resources.

During the winter, the Point Revenge people likely gathered together in the forests, hunting caribou and other available creatures and staying in more substantial frame, skin, and earth dwellings. As spring approached, the group splintered into smaller bands and moved towards the coast, establishing temporary settlements near river mouths and the inner reaches of the bays and hunting seals, birds, and fish. Sometime around July or August, these groups likely left the inner bays and headed for the outer coast, with bands forming together to make slightly larger groups to exploit both marine and terrestrial resources. While on the outer coast, people frequently moved around, changing hunting grounds, contacting neighbors, and engaging in trade. Finally, with the coming of fall, the people moved from the coasts back into the inner bays and spent time hunting caribou and harp seals in order to obtain winter clothing.[167]

Because these settlements were dispersed and wide ranging, the Point Revenge people probably did not hunt walruses or whales, which usually require cooperation from large groups of hunters. On the other hand, seals, caribou, birds, bear, and small mammals typically appear as faunal remains in Point Revenge sites and thus made up the majority of their diet during these seasonal movements.[168] Point Revenge people also likely traded with the Dorset people to the north for Ramah Chert and other commodities during their travels. In the end, it appears that the members of the Point Revenge Complex lived in small groups scattered over a wide range of territory and engaged in seasonal migrations to obtain food and trading goods.[169]

The Prehistoric Little Passage Complex, Historic Beothuk Indians, and Other Native American Groups of Newfoundland

Across the Strait of Belle Isle from Labrador lies Newfoundland, where the people practiced a culture very similar to the Point Revenge Complex (Figure 12.). Early Paleo-Eskimo people initially settled Newfoundland sometime around 700 B.C. and were eventually replaced by the later Paleo-Eskimo Dorset people.[iv] Dorset tools and sites exist across much of Newfoundland, but disappeared from the island sometime around A.D. 800 and probably did not exist during the period of L'Anse Aux Meadows.[170] Sometime around A.D. 500, while the Dorset still inhabited the island, researchers think that the first groups of Native Americans traversed the Strait of Belle Isle and entered Newfoundland.[171] Although no evidence exists to suggest that the Dorset and Native Americans had an antagonistic relationship with one another, it remains a distinct possibility that the two peoples came into direct competition with each other over the island's limited resources during times of trouble. Because of the occasional dearth of available food, many archaeologists believe that typically Newfoundland only supported one culture at a time.[172] As a result, the arrival of the Native Americans on Newfoundland may have contributed to the downfall and eventual extinction of the Dorset culture on the island.

By A.D. 1000, archaeologists believe that the Beaches Complex began to emerge among the Native Americans living on the island. The complex received its name from the Beaches Site in northern Bonavista Bay and is characterized by side notched points,

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[iv] Although the Dorset and other Paleo-Eskimo and Eskimo peoples are native to America, archaeologists believe they came to America in a later migration from Asia and are culturally and ethnically distinct from the earlier arrivals who peopled the sub-arctic regions of North and South America. Therefore, these people are generally referred to as Eskimo or Inuit rather than as Native American.

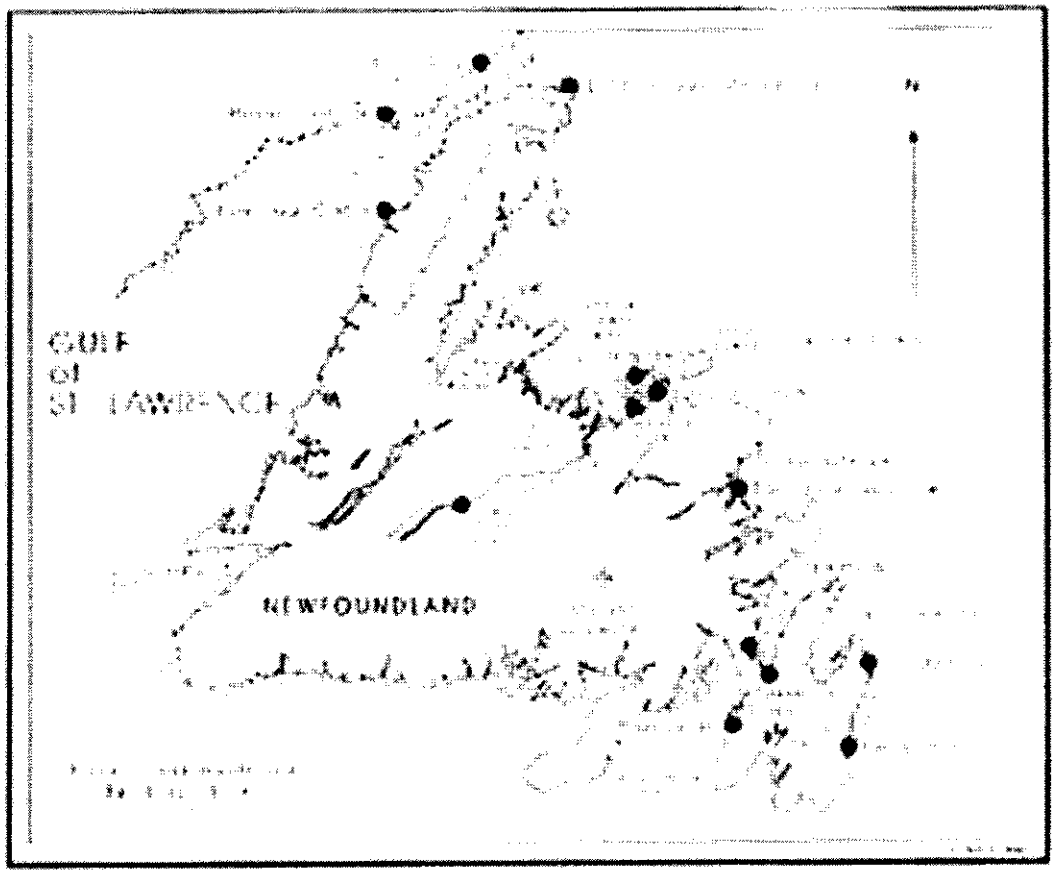

Figure 12.

Map of Important Archaeological Sites in Newfoundland

Pastore, 14.